[97:45] Chapter 1

The Tapirapé River

000 [Ed., pp. 45-47 and most of p. 49 are omitted; Map 2 appears on p. 48 in the original text.]

[97:49] Topography of the Surrounding Area

133 137 The Tapirapé River flows through a vast savanna region which is separated from it, along most of its course, by a strip of forest quite irregular in width. This savanna, as a rule, extends [97:50] over such flat ground that the horizon would be very wide if it were not for the trees, two or three meters high, which stand a few paces from each other and make up what is called the campo cerrado [Tr., savanna with scattered scrub forest]. It is true that sometimes the distance between the trees increases, and they become better developed and a few meters higher. There are also large empty areas, that is to say, grassland completely free of arboreal growth. Sometimes these stretches are crossed by a narrow forest strip of high trees concealing a small stream, or they are broken by swampy groves of muriti palms. This does not prevent large areas of empty grassland from remaining flooded during the dry season, when their black soil [134] is often so slippery that it well deserves the name of "soap" which I gave these places of involuntary gymnastics as I skated over them.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that most of the grasslands surrounding the Tapirapé River dry out at that time of year to such a point that they become easily inflammable. On June 15, 1935, while I was in Tampiitana [later referred to as Tampiitana], the village of the Tapirapé Indians, I saw pillars of smoke rising to the north, southwest, and east, and this brought to my attention the existence of grasslands and people in those parts. The soil of the dry grasslands can be 134 [481] so hard that the Indians massage their feet and legs after having walked several hours over it. Only rarely, however, is this soil rocky. I found it covered with small, round, brownish-red stones in only a few restricted areas, especially in small stretches of campo cerrado close to the forest inhabited by the Tapirapé.

[Text continues on p. 6]

I left at 6:30 the following morning. Everything was wet with dew. I skated over a stretch of black earth, damp and slippery ("soap"). I saw jaguar tracks. At eight o'clock, I reached a flooded forest strip which I had to ford. The same thing happened after walking another ten minutes. At ten o'clock I reached a traditional Tapirapé resting place located in a small patch of forest which contains fresh water. I rested there until four in the afternoon, and then set out again and waded through a swampy area. At 5:30 I reached dry scrub land where I was able to set up camp for the night. Before going to sleep, I heard frequent jaguar calls.

When I awoke on the twenty-first my clothes were soaked through with dew. I set out at six o'clock. Half an hour later, I was lost in a large and swampy muriti grove. At seven o'clock I reached dry scrub land, and at 9:15 the great forest. During the first 15 minutes of walking, the ground of the forest was more or less dry, but after that it became completely flooded. I walked for an hour and a half in water, which flowed in several places. At 11:30 [97:52] I found manioc in a brook. I then crossed four gardens separated from each other by strips of forest. At a quarter before one, I met four youths of the Tapirapé tribe, and half an hour later, still walking through the immense forest, I spotted in its midst the village of those Indians.

When I returned from the village to Porto Salvação on August 5 of the same year, I made the whole trip in a single day. I left at dawn with a Tapirapé youth. Although these Indians, as a rule, walk a little more slowly than the local Brazilian frontiersmen, their pace is still quite rapid and very even so that they proceed at the same speed through forest and grassland, and since they hardly stop to rest in the daytime, they may walk 40 or 50 kilometers a day.

On the way back, we took a different course through the forest. The area we had gone through on the way out was still flooded. We walked on ground that was quite dry, making a wide curve to the west. We reached the grassland within two hours. In many areas the Indians had already burned the grass, and our feet and legs were free of that hindering growth which adds so much to the traveler's weariness. Once in a while, a fresh breeze blew upon us. We walked four hours through open grassland and scrub forest, with frequent glimpses of pairs of deer, until we reached the traditional Tapirapé resting place in the small patch of forest containing fresh water. There we found Reverend Kegel